

Primary Source Pack | Atomic Vets

Background: After WWII, U.S. military atomic testing exposed many soldiers to dangerous radiation, causing long-term health issues. Despite their concerns, the military denied the risks and delayed compensation, leaving veterans feeling betrayed. This history raises ongoing questions about government accountability and the ethical treatment of soldiers.

Objective: Examine the following primary sources to determine how they relate to the activity's guiding question and writing prompt.

Source 1: Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), October 15, 1990 (Excerpts)

“Section 2. Findings, Purpose, and Apology.

- (a) FINDINGS.—The Congress finds that—
- (i) fallout emitted during the Government's above-ground nuclear tests in Nevada exposed individuals who lived in the downwind affected area in Nevada, Utah, and Arizona to radiation that is presumed to have generated an excess of cancers among these individuals;
 - (ii) the health of the individuals who were unwitting participants in these tests was put at risk to serve the national security interests of the United States;
 - (iii) radiation released in underground uranium mines that were providing uranium for the primary use and benefit of the nuclear weapons program of the United States Government exposed miners to large doses of radiation and other airborne hazards in the mine environment that together are presumed to have produced an increased incidence of lung cancer and respiratory diseases among these miners;
 - (iv) the United States should recognize and assume responsibility for the harm done to these individuals; and
 - (v) the Congress recognizes that the lives and health of uranium miners and of innocent individuals who lived downwind from the Nevada tests were involuntarily subjected to increased risk of injury and disease to serve the national security interests of the United States.
- (b) PURPOSE.—It is the purpose of this Act to establish a procedure to make partial restitution to the individuals described in subsection (a) for the burdens they have borne for the Nation as a whole.
- (c) APOLOGY.—The Congress apologizes on behalf of the Nation to the individuals described in subsection (a) and their families for the hardships they have endured.”

Source: United States Congress. 1990. “[H.R. 2372 – Radiation Exposure Compensation Act](#),” p. 1.

Source 2: Interview with Tom Saffer, U.S. Marine Corps (Excerpts)

"That was my beginning as a nuclear veteran, and if I had my life to lead over again, I would probably have spent it in a military prison because, knowing what I know today, I would have refused to come here.

12 miles off in that direction was the control tower where the scientists detonated the bomb. It blew the steel door off its hinges and embedded it in the wall. That is all a matter of record. I have learned that from my research. That is how powerful this thing was -- the control tower is 12 miles away and we were only 2 miles from it.

To this day, I don't see any reason why we were ever taken that close within 30 minutes after [atomic test] Priscilla was detonated. What was the ostensible purpose of taking us there? I have no idea. It was dumb. It was absolute sheer stupidity, and there was no reason why we should have been put in these trenches here either, two miles from Ground Zero. Many years later, when I started researching and writing a book, I discovered why we were put here -- to test the effects of the weapon on us -- just like the equipment, just like the animals -- they were in cages out there -- to see how we would perform physiologically and psychologically.

This Priscilla test for the Marine Corps was a familiarization test for us officers. We were supposed to quote, "get the feel of an atomic explosion." We got more than a feel; we also got the effects. But we were put out here as observers, albeit two-miles-from-Ground-Zero-observers, and then we were supposed to go back and swamp any fear that our troops may have had."

Source: Interview with Tom Saffer, U.S. Marine Corps. 1999. ["People's Century I Fallout: 1945-1995."](#) PBS.

Source 3: Photograph of Atomic Test Priscilla detonation, Nevada Test Site, June 24, 1957.



Published: Atomic test "Priscilla" detonated at the Nevada Test Site, 1957 June 24

Source: [Photograph of atomic test Priscilla detonation, Nevada Test Site \(Nev.\), June 24, 1957](#). University of Nevada, Las Vegas Libraries.

Source 4: VA Finally Agrees to Free Medical Care for 'Atomic Veterans.' Washington Post. April 7, 1983. (Excerpts)

"After 17 months of delay, the Veterans Administration yesterday agreed to give free medical treatment to military personnel who took part in open-air atomic tests and whose illnesses might have been caused by exposure to radiation.

The policy change, announced at a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee meeting, was a belated victory for the nation's "atomic veterans"--an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 servicemen who participated in atomic tests in Nevada and the Pacific between 1945 and 1962.

Free medical care brings the veterans one step closer to obtaining the same limited rights that the VA has granted reluctantly to Vietnam veterans exposed to the defoliant Agent Orange.

But VA officials said the agency does not intend to soften its policy of rejecting most "atomic vets' " disability compensation claims VA scientists say they do not believe there is any evidence that those veterans were exposed to enough radiation to suffer health problems...

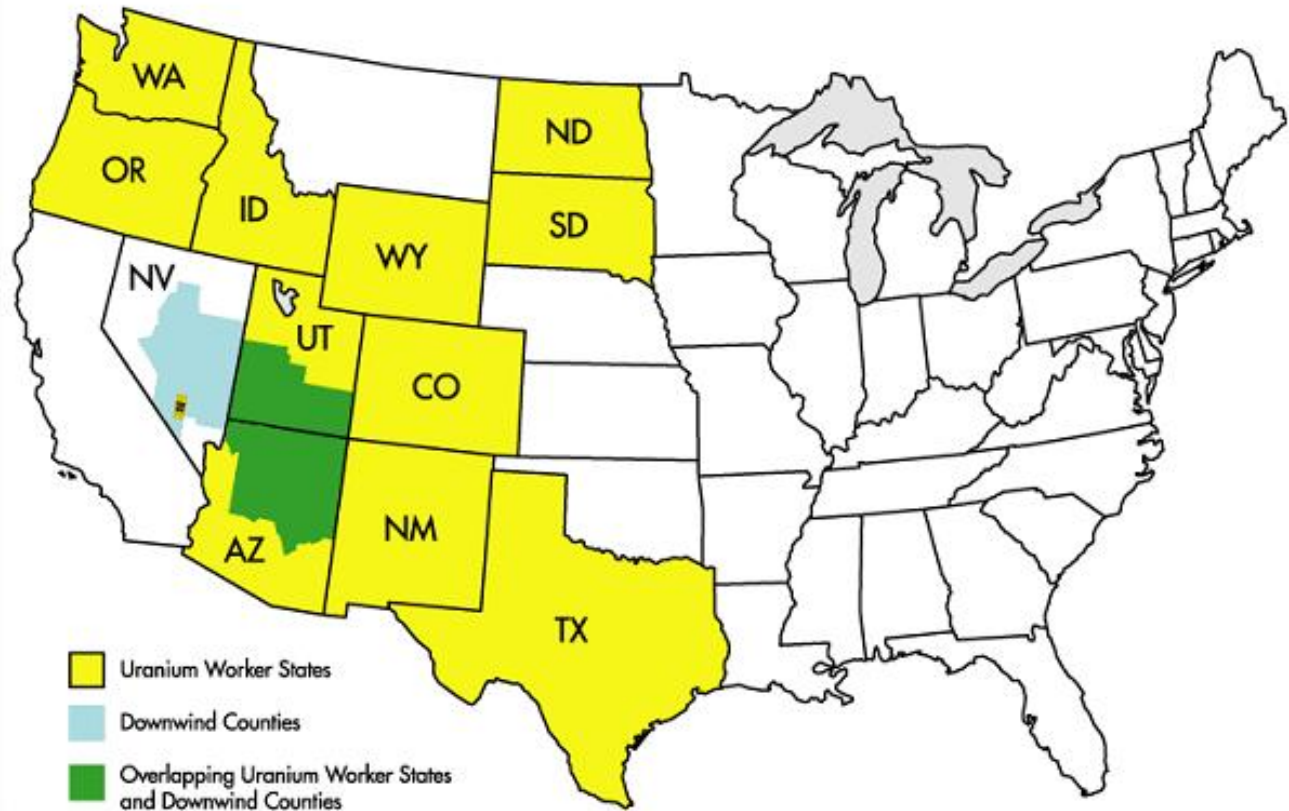
A parade of witnesses, mostly from the National Association of Atomic Veterans, also denounced the VA for failing to enact standard procedures for deciding when "atomic veterans" should receive disability compensation.

A total of 2,067 "atomic veterans" have filed claims for a variety of disabilities that they blame on exposure to radiation. The VA has approved 29 of them, including 15 on appeal."

Source: Pete Earley. April 7, 1983. "[VA Finally Agrees to Free Medical Care for 'Atomic Veterans.'](#)" Washington Post.

Source 5: Areas Covered by the Radiation Exposure Compensation Program

RECA COVERED AREAS



Source: United States Department of Justice. 2010. ["RECA Covered Areas."](#)

Source 6: Radiation-Exposed Veterans Compensation Act of 1988 (Public Law 100-321), May 20, 1988. (Excerpts)

"An Act...

To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide a presumption of service connection to veterans (and survivors of such veterans) who participated in atmospheric or underwater nuclear tests as part of the United States nuclear weapons testing program or in the American occupation of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, Japan, and who suffer from certain diseases that may be attributable to exposure to ionizing radiation, and other purposes."

Source: The United States Congress. 1988. ["H.R. 1811 - Radiation-Exposed Veterans Compensation Act of 1988."](#)

Source 7: President Bill Clinton. Human Radiation Experiments Report. October 2, 1995. (Excerpt)

“The goal was to understand the effects of radiation exposure on the human body. While most of the tests were ethical by any standards, some were unethical not only by today's standards but by the standards of the time in which they were conducted. They failed both the test of our national values and the test of humanity. In one experience, scientists -- experiment, scientists injected plutonium into 18 patients without their knowledge. In another, doctors exposed indigent cancer patients to excessive doses of radiation, a treatment from which it is virtually impossible that they could ever benefit...

The report also demonstrates that these and other experiments were carried out on precisely those citizens who count most on the government for its health -- the destitute and the gravely ill. But the dispossessed were not alone. Members of the military, precisely those on whom we in our government count most, they were also test subjects.

Informed consent means your doctor tells you the risk of the treatment you are about to undergo. In too many cases, informed consent was withheld. Americans were kept in the dark about the effects of what was being done to them. The deception extended beyond the test subjects themselves to encompass their families and the American people as a whole, for these experiments were kept secret, and they were shrouded not for a compelling reason of national security but for the simple fear of embarrassment. And that was wrong.

Those who led the government when these decisions were made are no longer here to take responsibility for what they did. They're not here to apologize to the survivors, the family members or the communities whose lives were darkened by the shadow of the atom and these choices. So today, on behalf of another generation of American leaders and another generation of American citizens, the United States of America offers a sincere apology to those of our citizens who were subjected to these experiments, to their families and to their communities.

When the government does wrong, we have a moral responsibility to admit it. The duty we owe to one another to tell the truth and to protect our fellow citizens from excesses like these is one we can never walk away from. Our government failed in that duty, and it offers an apology to the survivors and their families and to all the American people who must, who must be able to rely upon the United States to keep its word to tell the truth and to do the right thing.” (Timestamp: 00:24:58)

Source: Human Radiation Experiments Report. October 2, 1995. [Transcription and video provided by C-SPAN.](#)